

Payne-Douglass House
Valparaiso Avenue
Menlo Park
San Mateo County
California

HABS No. CA-2128

HABS
CAL,
41-MENPA,
3-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PAYNE-DOUGLASS HOUSE

CA-2128

HABS
CAL.
41-MENP
3-

Location: Valparaiso Avenue, Campus of Menlo School and College,
Menlo Park, San Mateo County, California.

Present Owner: Menlo School and College.

Present Use: Administrative offices, study halls, and bachelor faculty
apartments.

Significance: This house, one of the first in California to be
constructed entirely of reinforced concrete, was designed
by the prominent California architect, William Curlett, for
the mining heiress Mary O'Brien Payne and her wealthy
husband, Theodore F. Payne. The house was subsequently
owned by the inventor Leon F. Douglass.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1909-1914. The house was commissioned in 1906 and construction was probably delayed by Mr. Payne's death in 1907.
2. Architect: William Curlett (1845-1914). Curlett came to San Francisco from Ireland in 1871. Initially he worked as a draftsman for Thomas J. Johnston; they established a firm of Johnston & Curlett in 1873. In 1877 he joined Augustus Laver in the firm of Laver & Curlett, and thus was partially responsible for the 1879 design of Linden Towers for James C. Flood. They designed the William S. O'Brien mausoleum, which Oscar Lewis described as "long unrivaled (despite stiff competition) for sheer ugliness in the field of cemetery architecture." After 1880 Curlett was associated with several different architects: Theodore A. Eisen, Walter J. Cuthbertson, and others. In 1905 Curlett's son, Aleck E. Curlett, joined him, forming the firm William Curlett & Son.

Curlett's being Irish may have had an influence in his being repeatedly commissioned by the new-rich of the era. For example, he designed James D. Phelan's Montalvo in Saratoga; the William Crocker Nob Hill mansion; the Floods' San Francisco Street house. Some of his important commercial San Francisco buildings were the Phelan Building, the Shreve Building, the Lick-Wilmerding School, and the amazingly narrow Liberty Mutual Insurance Building (now Citizens Federal Savings & Loan) at 130 Bush Street. Curlett also had commissions in Sacramento,

Fresno, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

In 1910 he was chosen president of the San Francisco (now Northern California) Chapter of the A.I.A. He served for many years on the California State Board of Architecture, Northern Section, and at one time was its president.

3. Original and subsequent owners:

1891 July Gen. W. D. Dimond to Mary Pauline Payne.

1891 August 14 Book of Deeds 57, p. 375
Maria A. Rathbone, et al. to Mary Pauline Payne

1921 June 1 Book 14, p. 233, Official Records
Mary Pauline Payne to Leon F. Douglass

1945 Douglass Trust to Menlo School and College

4. Original plans and construction: This was one of the first houses in San Mateo County to be constructed entirely of reinforced concrete and an early example of such construction in residential architecture in the west.

Blueprints of the original architectural drawings of the mezzanine and second-floor plans are located in the Menlo College files.

5. Alterations and additions: The exterior of the house has changed little since 1910. An open porch on the south was enclosed for the Douglasses and fire escapes were added under the school's ownership. The south terrace was resurfaced in 1974.

Substantial alterations have occurred in the interior to allow for its use by the school although attention has been given to the preservation of the major rooms of the mezzanine.

6. Builder, contractor, suppliers:

(a) The overall builder's contract between Mary Pauline Payne and the firm of Beetham and Hinds (Attila H. Beetham, H. H. Hinds) was filed July 14, 1909, for the purpose of having a three-story and basement building constructed, to be used as a residence. The completion date was June 8, 1910, with architect W. Curlett signing for Mrs. Payne (Misc. 19, page 117).

(b) On April 13, 1910, a contract was signed between Mrs. Payne and J. P. Ahlert of Menlo Park, presumably for the installation of a gas system. A copy of the contract could not be located.

(c) Beetham and Hinds completed their work under two separate contracts on December 15, 1910, and on December 16, 1910. The first part, signed by Aleck C. Curlett as supervising architect and as a member of the firm of William Curlett and Son, called for carpenter work, mill work, roofing work (Book 19, page 347); the second part called for metal bracketing, metal lathing, plastering, etc., and was also signed by Aleck C. Curlett.

(d) A contract was signed between Mrs. Payne and the firm of Mangrum and Otter, Inc., as of March 8, 1910, with completion recorded as of March 6, 1911, and covering a complete hot water system (Book 21, page 280).

(e) A contract was handed to the Decker Electrical Company, Inc., July 12, 1910, and the job, calling for wiring, fixtures, etc., was signed for as completed on June 10, 1911, by Aleck E. Curlett.

(f) On March 6, 1912, J. G. Keefe agreed to paint the building.

(g) The American Marble and Mosaic Company contracted with Mrs. Payne on May 21, 1912, to do work on the building, but no details are available.

Note: all contracts, except for the one made with Ahlert, were handed to San Francisco firms or individuals.

B. Historical Context

Theodore F. Payne (1845-1907) came to California in 1861 where he became very wealthy as a manufacturer of bolts and nuts, which is generally classified as being a "hardware merchant." In 1880 he married Mary Pauline O'Brien. This was two years after she had inherited \$300,000 from her uncle William S. O'Brien, one of the Comstock Lode Silver Kings. Her inheritance carried the stipulation that it would not be controlled by any future husband. William F. Curlett designed their imposing, though rambling, stick-style house which still exists at 1409 Sutter Street in San Francisco.

After the 1906 earthquake, the Paynes decided to build a home on the Peninsula on property they had acquired which had formerly been a portion of the Atherton estate. Again they relied on Curlett. A popular version is that Mrs. Payne was attempting to reproduce an Italian villa she had visited. But one should not neglect the fact that the popular style of the time was compatible with solid construction of steel and concrete.

Construction was apparently delayed by Mr. Payne's death in 1907 and the settlement of his estate. Construction of the \$100,000 (not one

million as is frequently said) house did not commence until July, 1909. The type of construction was different and the detail work was time-consuming. The job brought employment and new people to Menlo Park. Much of the lumber used to form the concrete was re-used in house constructions in Menlo Park.

Mrs. Payne moved into the house by the summer of 1914; she lived there until 1921 when she sold it, reportedly for \$600,000. She died the following year in New York City. Leon Forrest Douglass, the new owner, was a modest man although he was a famous, prolific inventor. It was his spring motor device which revolutionized the phonograph industry. Eldridge Johnson and he formed the Victor Talking Machine Company, which later became R.C.A. Victor. Douglass retired from the Victor Company the same year he purchased the Payne property.

Many of his other important inventions were perfected in this house. He pioneered color motion pictures and developed the "Technicolor" process. He developed a lens for motion picture cameras. He patented the first coin-slot pay telephone as well as the first automatic cigarette lighter. He improved radio receivers. His fortune and freedom permitted Douglass time for inventions after retirement. In the basement of the mansion he installed a workshop for heavy machines. On the mezzanine he developed a moving picture sound laboratory. A huge organ was installed by Wurlitzer in the library. It was necessary to add a portion of grill flooring in order for the sound from the tubes below to rise. Experiments with underwater cameras were carried on in a pool-tank at the house.

In 1935 the Douglasses built a modest, comfortable, livable bungalow on the property, to which they moved. Mr. Douglass died in February, 1940, and his wife, Victoria Adams, died in 1943.

During World War II the mansion was occupied by convalescing blind patients from the nearby U. S. Dibble General Hospital.

In 1945 the Douglass Trust sold the property to the Menlo School and College, whose campus adjoined the property to the west. The spectacular residence, dubbed Douglass Hall, has been retained as a dominant feature of the campus.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Reinforced concrete, 100' (three-bay front) x 170' (seven bays), three stories, flat roof, elaborate modillioned cornice between second and third floors, smaller cornice and parapet above third floor, columned porte cochere, concrete balconies at second-floor windows; elaborate interior ornamentation, including coffered ceilings, gold leaf, marble mantels, oak parquet floors.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, Recorder's Office, Hall of Records, Redwood City, California.

Douglass, Leon Forrest. "Leon Forrest Douglass: An American Success Story." Unpublished autobiography in the possession of Mr. Douglass' daughter, Mrs. Douglass Langdon.

B. Secondary sources:

1. Books:

Olmstead, Roger, and Watkins, T. H., sponsored by the Junior League of San Francisco, Inc. Here Today. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1968.

Regnery, Dorothy V. An Enduring Heritage. Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 1976.

Victor Talking Machine Company. Victrola Book of the Opera. New Jersey: Victor Talking Machine Company, 1921.

2. Newspaper clippings, pamphlets:

The Menlo Atherton Recorder, "Menlo School and College Expands Facilities," August, 1969.

Redwood City Democrat, January 20, 1910; February 12, 1914; April 9, 1914.

Redwood City Standard, April 28, 1921; February 2, 1922.

San Francisco Chronicle, March 18, 1970.

San Francisco Examiner, March 13, 1907; March 15, 1907.

San Mateo County Historical Association, 73-242 Clippings; 72-162 Memorabilia; 72-8 Manuscript.

Sunset Magazine, October, 1917; November, 1921.

C. Old Views

ca. 1920 photograph of drawing room, in collection of Menlo School, Douglass Hall.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was sponsored jointly by the National Park Service and the Junior League of Palo Alto. Recorded under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1974 at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office at the Latham-Hopkins Gatehouse, Menlo Park, California. Project Supervisor was Kim Spurgeon (Assistant Professor of Architecture, Kansas State University) and the student architects were Stephen Farneth (Carnegie Mellon University), Robert Randall (University of Houston), Aino Vieira da Rosa (University of Oregon), and Amy Weinstein (University of Pennsylvania).

The written data were prepared by R. Patrick Christopher of the Historic American Buildings Survey in August, 1974. He was assisted by Mrs. Marguerite Kramer, Atherton, California. The data were re-written by Dorothy Regnery in 1975, and final editing was done in the HABS Washington office in February, 1983, by Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian.